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Headline news for busy
church editors

The UCC Office of Communication:

"Connecting the Gospel and Justice to Media, Churches and Community"

May 1997

Here is the Good News of the United Church of Christ, especially edited for congregational publications, with topical news of the wider church, helpful hints to strengthen members' faith and pride in the denomination and personal testimonies to stir the spirit. Each story is short and complete and can stand alone, ready to drop into the weekly bulletin or the monthly newsletter. The code at the end of some entries refers interested readers to a more comprehensive story in *United Church News*.

TAKE A PASTOR TO LUNCH TODAY —

...or supper or breakfast. Every month in his church's newsletter, the Rev. Jeff Spencer, pastor of Tolt Congregational UCC, Carnation, Wash., writes: "Here's an offer from your friendly neighborhood pastor. If you gather five or more friends, identify a topic and invite that pastor guy (and get it on his calendar), he'll spend the evening with you."

The idea, says Spencer, is to provide a more informal place for a chat, and sharing a simple meal helps to set the mood. Topics range from the theological to the sociological. Now there's thought for food.

OH NO! — The pastor was conducting Bible study one morning with the ladies of the church.

"What do you think the author of Hebrews 11:1 meant with these lines?" he asked and quoted: "The substances of things hoped for, the evidence of things unseen."

"Hash, probably," responded one church member.

— Our thanks to Chris Anderson,
Heidelberg UCC, York, Pa.

WHAT TOOK TV SO LONG? — Television made history, of sorts, when Ellen DeGeneres became TV's first openly gay actress in a leading role and had her character, Ellen Morgan, also come out in the April 30 episode of ABC-TV's "Ellen."

To which the Rev. Arthur Lawrence Cribbs Jr., Executive Director of the UCC Office of Communication responds, "Great, but what took so long? In the UCC, gay issues 'have been a 'live' discussion for years," he points out, noting that the denomination was the first to accept gay and lesbian clergy and regularly campaigns for human and civil rights for people who are gay or lesbian. So, too, is the public engaged in the issue, as the recent spate of media attention to gay marriages in Hawaii can attest.

"So, in some ways, TV is catching up with society on this issue," Cribbs says, but adds that TV is right to bring such issues into the public forum "as long as the issues are raised in ways that are sensitive and not sensational."

The Office of Communication is on the side of those who welcome this programming, he says.

CANDY BOWL THEOLOGY — Those little M&M candies have taken on a theological life of their own. The colored sweets are used in confirmation classes at First Congregational UCC, Kalamazoo, Mich., to teach about denominations.

"We started with a big bowl of all the colors mixed up," says teacher Pam Keesler. Everybody in the big bowl was considered Christian and later Roman Catholic. But with Luther, the bowl was split into green for Catholics and another color for Protestants. As new denominations were formed, each was represented by a smaller bowl filled with the same colored M&Ms. And the UCC? It got four bowls signifying the four strands of the denomination. "I also tossed a few other colors into the UCC bowl," explains Keesler, "because for many reasons, people of other denominations join the UCC, making it a really rainbow-colored denomination."

It was a lesson that will "stick with the kids," she says of her candy bowl theology. Unfortunately, "many good church people got devoured along the way."

UNITED CHURCH NEWS IS AWARD WINNER — For the 10th time in 11 years, United Church News has been on the receiving end of the Religious Public Relations Council's annual awards. This year, the paper received an overall award of excellence for a single story, "Squatter tests Ohio church's goodwill," and an award of merit for the paper's new look.

UCC readers will want to catch the paper's special pullout section on "Uprooted People and other Issues of Immigration" in the June issue.

REFLECTIONS — "Something happened the other day that sheds light on the way things move here in Africa. One of the typists was off because of a sick child, then fell sick herself and was hospitalized for two days. When I found out about it from another typist, I asked why she did not tell us during announcement time after morning devotions. She said she could not share that information herself because it was told to her by "higher up" personnel and she would be usurping their authority! That is often the way things go in Africa — don't overstep your place. However, if she was recognized as an educated and knowledgeable woman, she could have diplomatically asked a question of where was or how is our colleague and thus shown respect for her culture. There are many educated and sharp women in Africa who are taking a leadership role in society, but many are like the woman who thought she couldn't speak out."

— Jane Williams, UCC/Disciples missionary in Botswana, Africa

PLAY BALL — ... but not with public funding, admonishes the Rev. Ricky Rask, who — with the help of a few colleagues — is spearheading a citizens' petition protesting state funding of a new \$300 million stadium in Minneapolis/St. Paul.

"We're not anti-stadium," she stresses, "we're anti-public funding. We need to take care of our kids first."

Her campaign has \$20,000, her opponents \$2 million.

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Keeping You Posted is edited by William C. Winslow and produced monthly by the UCC Office of Communication, 700 Prospect Ave., Cleveland, OH 44115-1100. Visit us on

the Web at <<http://www.ucc.org>>.

Send story ideas to: William C. Winslow, UCC Office of Communication, 475 Riverside Dr., 16th fl., New York, NY 10115; e-mail: <winsloww@ucc.org>.

AS COMFORTABLE IN THE KITCHEN AS THEY ARE IN THE PULPIT — ...is the headline of a recent New York Times article about clergy cooks. Among others, religion reporter Gustav Niebuhr profiled the Rev. Alan Johnson, co-pastor of Saugatuck Congregational UCC, Westport, Conn.

"The way food is prepared, out of delight and joy and love, connects us with the spirit," Johnson told Niebuhr. Indeed, while an invitation to the Johnson table is to be greatly savored, he is more concerned with the fellowship that good food provides. "If you put people very much at ease and feed them well, they get connected with one another," he says.

The Rev. Holly Whitcomb would offer a hearty mealtime blessing to that. A UCC pastor in Milwaukee, Wis., who is a retreat leader and spiritual director, Whitcomb is author of the cookbook, *Feasting with God: Adventures with Table Spirituality* (United Church Press, 1996).

Bon appetite!

— Our thanks to *The New York Times*

CHANGING THE FACE OF GIVING — "Some people don't feel comfortable with major gifts in the church," says Nancy J. Fogal, the UCC's first Director of Special Giving for the UCC's Commission on Development. "Perhaps they see it as flaunting their wealth."

The challenge, Fogal says, is to change that kind of thinking into understanding giving as a way of using money for ministry. National statistics show that religious donations account for 55-60 percent of the annual \$144 billion in charitable giving, "but almost none of that total comes in the form of major gifts," she notes. The goal, she says, is to find new ways to approach people about special giving and to "show people who already have a particular interest or favorite cause how to donate to the most effective program within the church."

UCC AGENCY CHALLENGES SECURITIES AND EXCHANGE COMMISSION — In a recent letter to members, United Church Foundation asked its church investor members to protest a decision by the Securities and Exchange Commission to disallow any resolution dealing with employment matters like sweatshops overseas or discrimination in employment in the United States.

The S.E.C. argues that these issues are "ordinary business," the sole responsibility of management, and that investors have no right to sponsor shareholder resolutions on these issues. But United Church Foundation executive Donald Hart says the input of concerned investors has been vitally important in encouraging corporations to act responsibly, noting that issues raised by the UCC over the last 25 years include the environment, human rights overseas, equal employment opportunity in the United States and fighting apartheid in South Africa.

"We believe this position by the S.E.C. staff is extremely short-sighted and destroys a basic right as shareholder," Hart says.

United Church Foundation invests funds of the UCC church family — mostly from local congregations. While the letter was addressed to Foundation members only, the UCC Corporate Social Responsibility office encourages all local churches and individual investors with securities to call for the S.E.C. to change its policy.

For more information, and a sample letter, call the Social Responsibility office at (212) 870-2889.